

Perceptions about “Good Readers”: Analyzing Curricular, Linguistic, and Socioeconomic Differences

Lindsey Moses
Arizona State University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lindsey Moses, Arizona State University, 1050 S. Forest Mall, ED 440G, Tempe, AZ 85287. E-mail: Lindseymoses1@gmail.com

Abstract

Students’ perceptions about “what good readers do” are representative of their definition of reading and what they believe they should be striving toward as a reader. These beliefs about reading influence their motivation and ways they engage with texts. In this study, interviews were conducted with students in three first-grade classrooms regarding their beliefs about good readers. Utilizing a qualitative approach with descriptive statistics, interview responses were analyzed with specific consideration for the variables of first language, socioeconomic status and curricular approach. After analyzing nine reoccurring themes according to the variables, curricular approaches in these settings had the largest influence on student perceptions.

Key Words: Reading, perceptions, motivation, primary grades

Students’ perceptions about “what good readers do” are representative of their definition of reading and what they believe they should be striving toward as a reader. These beliefs about reading influence their motivations and ways they engage with texts. As Christian and Bloome (2004) note, “Given the centrality of learning to read in early elementary schooling and how much importance parents, politicians, community leaders and the general public place on learning to read, it has become an important factor in students’ social identities” (p. 366). Drawing on a sociocultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978), the researcher believes that children acquire knowledge and perceptions based on their unique interpersonal interactions with others. Three yearlong educational ethnographies conducted by the researcher in first-grade classrooms explored literacy practices and identity development among diverse learners in significantly different educational settings. Across the three studies, the researcher identified a reoccurring theme that students’ school experiences influenced their literacy development and ideas about what constitutes proficient reading. With this understanding, the researcher sought to analyze student interview responses by curricular, linguistic and socioeconomic differences. By exploring students’ perceptions about proficient readers, researchers and teachers can better understand which aspects of reading might need more or less attention.

The purpose of this study (a part of the larger three studies) was to gain a deeper understanding of primary-aged students’ perceptions about literacy and what “good readers do.” The researcher sought to analyze possible re-occurring themes from student interviews with a range of curricular, linguistic and socioeconomic differences in three first-grade classrooms. The classrooms included a monolingual, private inquiry-based classroom with no free and reduced lunch, a mixed-language, public inquiry-based classroom with 67% free and reduced lunch, and a mixed language, public scripted core-curriculum classroom with 78% free and reduced lunch.

The researcher refers to two curricular approaches: inquiry-based and scripted core curriculum. For the purposes of this study, the researcher defines inquiry-based instruction as creating a classroom curriculum “in which students engage in ‘hands-on’ investigations as part of curriculum units ranging from science (Gallas, 1995; Gibbons, 202; Palinscar et al., 1998), math (Cobb, 1995; Lampert et al., 1996), to literature (Davis, 2001; Donoahue, 1998; McMahon et al., 1997)” (Haneda & Wells, 2008, p. 120). An inquiry-based curricular approach is driven by students’ curiosities, explorations, interests and dialogue related to curriculum units. Authentic texts, trade books, and teacher and student generated materials are used for curricular resources. Worksheets and predetermined formal assessments are not a part of this curricular approach.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher defines scripted core curriculum as the use of a commercial core program that requires the use of an anthology, worksheets, teacher instruction (including specific dialogue) and instructional pacing that is established by the school district based on the commercial program recommendations. The scripted core curriculum classroom in this study used a commercial curriculum that had a teacher script. All teachers in the district were expected to be reading the same instruction at the same time. This curricular approach included specific instruction with sequenced skills-based worksheets, quizzes and end of unit assessments.

A thematic analysis of interviews from the three first-grade classrooms was conducted to analyze responses according to classroom curricular approaches, first language, and socioeconomic status as qualified by free and reduced lunch. Two main questions guided this study:

1. What are primary-aged students’ perceptions about literacy and “good readers”?
2. How do the curricular approach, first language and socioeconomic status influence the primary-aged students’ perceptions about literacy and “good readers”?

Literature Review

Multiple researchers have reported on strategies proficient readers use while reading (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter & Schuder, 1996; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Chevalier, Parrila, Ritchie, & Deacon, 2015). These findings have been integrated into widely used instructional practices to teach students strategies for comprehending text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Serravallo, 2015). These strategies include, but are not limited to asking questions, building background knowledge, making connections, making inferences, predicting, summarizing, synthesizing, and visualizing. This study sought to explore what variables might influence how young readers perceived what it meant to be good readers (and strategies of good readers). Reading questionnaires about how these strategies are used and characteristics of good readers have been reported to provide reflective opportunities and an effective method of informal assessment for teachers (Caton Johnson, 2005). This type of reflection encourages students to verbalize the processes they believe are involved in proficient reading. The researcher noticed significantly different responses and reflections during the interviews across the three studies, and that lead to a cross-case analysis including considerations of first-language, socio-economic status and curricular approaches in order to better understand perceptions about reading.

Reading Ability Perceptions

Over 15 years ago, Luke and Elkins (1998) encouraged literacy researchers to examine new literacies to better understand and explain the ever-expanding contexts of reading and writing in the 21st century. “However, in today’s elementary school curriculum, comprehension is often sacrificed to an overemphasis on phonics and decoding” (Cobb, 2012, p. 225). This has been reflected in students’ perceptions about reading in multiple studies (e.g., Cobb, 2012; Freppon, 1991; Johns & Ellis, 1976).

These studies report an emphasis on decoding and phonics in students' responses. Building on this research, this study aims at filling a gap in understanding how various variable influence students' reporting and perceptions.

Johns and Ellis' (1976) early study of children's conceptions about reading revealed students were largely unaware that comprehension was the purpose of reading. Their responses indicated that the majority of students associated the process of reading with the process of decoding. In this particular study, 60% of the students referenced word recognition as the purpose of reading. In a related study of high and low ability second-graders, Borko and Eisenhart (1986) reported that 48% of high readers attributed characteristics of good readers to possessing reading skills related to letter and word recognition. In addition to understanding students' views on characteristics of good readers, the need for examining possible variables and influences remain.

Miller and Yokum (1991) examined perceptions about reading with at-risk children and found that 55.3% associated word recognition abilities with good readers. Henk and Melnik (1998) problematized this finding when they stated, "These conceptions are driven by their personal sense of the nature of the reading process and by their contextual observation of the instructional emphases and practices that occur in the classroom" (p. 5). While Henk and Melnik (1998) found word recognition accuracy to be the most frequently student-identified category associated with good readers, they also identified additional categories associated with good readers. Additional categories included the following: teacher praise, reading rate, teachers' call upon patterns, study/practice, task/test performance, grades and comprehension. The majority of these identified characteristics do not focus on learning, but instead on performance and external factors such as praise, texts, grades and call upon patterns. This study expanded on Henk and Melnik's research by examining how the instructional emphases/approach as well as "at-risk" factors (SES and first-language) influence young readers' ideas about good readers.

The focus on characteristics of good readers has often been conducted with upper elementary (as in the Henk and Melnik study), but Cobb (2012) surveyed students from kindergarten through sixth grade. She analyzed students' drawings and responses about their perceptions of good readers and found, as recent as 2012, elementary children's most common verbal description of a good reader still included decoding (Cobb, 2012). However, it is encouraging to note that the second most common response in this more recent research was focused on comprehension, remembering facts and details or strategy use. Responses related to looking at pictures, neatness, attention to treatment of books, and reading behavior came behind the comprehension response. While there is a long history of research on reading perceptions, there remains a need for updated research of this type with diverse, primary-aged students in order to better understand the influences of curricular, linguistic and socioeconomic differences on student perceptions.

Curricular Choices

Researchers and teachers previously espoused the idea that students were "learning to read" in the primary grades (Chall, 1983) and "reading to learn" once they began the upper elementary years. This notion of "learning to read" before they are "reading to learn" places an emphasis on decontextualized decoding skills with an implication that there is little to no focus on learning from reading during the first three years of elementary school. While there has been a push for more balanced literacy instruction focused on comprehension for young learners, there remains a large focus on decoding skills in many scripted commercial literacy programs, particularly in the early grades. Allington (2013) reported the emphasis on explicit and systematic phonics, entrepreneurial core commercial programs, and the focus on the fidelity of implementation of these programs has not been

successful in improving early literacy instruction and learning. Because of this, the researcher purposefully selected three instructionally diverse classrooms to examine how this influenced students' perceptions.

In contrast to scripted and decoding-focused instruction, inquiry-based instruction has been documented to provide cognitive and social benefits for both monolinguals and bilinguals (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998; Guccione, 2011) and increase the use of comprehension strategies (Varelas & Pappas, 2006). The focus of this type of instruction is building on students' curiosities to gain and share information using integrated literacy practices including listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and visually representing. Students utilize text as a way to access new information, and the decoding and comprehension strategies are merely tools to help accomplish that goal (Guccione, 2011). Yet, bilinguals continue to primarily receive rote-based instruction focused on skill development (Allington, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1995). This study provides findings from linguistically and socioeconomically diverse students in inquiry-based and scripted classrooms in order to better understand students' perceptions about reading. Building on the re-occurring themes found in the qualitative responses, the researcher analyzed the influence of curriculum, first language and socioeconomic status.

Methods

This study was part of three larger educational ethnography studies that examined language and literacy practices in different educational contexts using a sociocultural perspective. After initial analysis and cross-case analysis from the three studies, the researcher identified re-occurring themes, one of them being the influence of curricular approaches as compared to SES and first language on students' perceptions of good readers. In order to provide a deeper analysis of this initial theme, the researcher adopted qualitative interview methods, and utilized descriptive statistics of the qualitative data to provide a deeper understanding of students' perceptions and possible variables that influenced their perceptions. While previous studies examined general perceptions about reading (Cobb, 2012; Freppon, 1991; Johns & Ellis, 1976) and others examined variables such as "students at risk" vs. not at risk (Miller & Yokum, 1991) or high readers vs. low readers (Eisenhart, 1986), the research was lacking qualitative research that could examine variables such as curricular approach.

The researcher first investigated the research questions using qualitative methods including interviews, thematic analysis, open coding, axial coding and comparative analysis of re-occurring themes across curricular (inquiry-based or scripted core curriculum), linguistic (monolingual English speaker or English learner) and socioeconomic variables (qualifies for free and reduced lunch or does not qualify). The purpose of the open and axial coding conducted by the researcher and additional rater was to co-construct themes and revise for specific codes, as opposed to analyzing for previously constructed categories. The researcher then utilized quantitative methods to calculate the descriptive statistics based on the initial qualitative coding in order to examine the influence of the variables being examined. Three first-grade classrooms were selected using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) because they included inquiry and scripted curriculum, monolingual and mixed language settings, and wide ranges of socioeconomic diversity for the three case studies. Students were interviewed about their perceptions of reading practices in the classroom, good readers, and themselves as readers. The Appendix provides the interview protocol that was used with the first-grade students. The specific interview question analyzed in this study asked students to answer the following question: "What do good readers do?"

Participants and Data Sources

Audio recordings captured interviews in the three first-grade classrooms and involved a total of 44 student interviews. This included 14 student interviews from the monolingual, private inquiry-based classroom with no free and reduced lunch, 12 student interviews from the mixed-language (7 ELLs and 5 monolingual English speakers), public inquiry-based classroom with 67% free and reduced lunch, and 18 interviews from the mixed language (11 ELLs and 7 monolingual English speakers), public scripted core-curriculum classroom with 78% free and reduced lunch. The interviews were part of a larger study examining literacy instruction and student perceptions and engagement. In all of the interviews, the students were asked, “What do you think good readers do?” Audio data was transcribed and analyzed by the researcher and additional rater.

Data Analysis

Two raters read the transcribed interview data. The researcher and the additional rater used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to document and discover meaning while identifying possible re-occurring themes in the interview transcriptions. Once the open coding was complete, they compared codes and negotiated agreement of axial codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The axial codes included the following: Decoding, Speed/Rate, Quantity, Strategies, Learning, Writing, Viewing, Effort, and Social Contexts. Description and examples of these codes are reported in the findings.

An overall classroom case study analysis of codes was conducted to identify the frequency count of each code per classroom. Data were analyzed and reported in three ways. First, frequency counts were conducted to identify the most to least frequently referenced codes. Next, straight percentiles for each axial code (theme) was analyzed according to curricular approach (inquiry or scripted), linguistic background (ELL or monolingual English speaker), and socioeconomic status (receiving free and reduced lunch or not receiving free and reduced lunch). The data were then further analyzed by examining percentages for each axial code (theme) with percentages of first language and socioeconomic status (monolingual without free and reduced lunch; monolingual with free and reduced lunch; ELL without free and reduced lunch; ELL with free and reduced lunch) broken down by site (inquiry-base private, inquiry-based public, scripted public). Finally, these descriptive statistics of the categories with the largest discrepancies are visually represented in bar graphs.

Results

The findings revealed nine re-occurring themes in the students’ perceptions about what good readers do: Decoding, Speed/Rate, Quantity, Strategies, Learning, Writing, Viewing, Effort, and Social Contexts. In the following sections, the researcher describes each coded theme and provides representative samples of the qualitative student responses. These findings add to the current body of research by providing qualitative data and analysis with additional descriptive statistics to examine the influential variables. These coded themes are listed in order from the most to the least frequently referenced with Decoding being the most frequent and Effort being the least frequent. Table 1 includes a frequency count of the categories.

Decoding

Decoding was the most frequently referenced response for being a characteristic of a good reader with 32 references. A student response for this code included reference to the knowledge, understanding

or practice of letter/sound correspondence. The practice of sounding out words and word recognition were also included in this category. Sample student responses included the following: “Sounds out the words” and “Knows a lot of words.”

Strategies

The codes of Strategies and Learning were tied for second and third most frequently referenced characteristics with 26 student references each. A student response was considered for the Strategies category if there was reference to comprehension strategies. These included, but were not limited to making connections, making predictions, asking questions and summarizing. Sample student responses included, “They make connections and predictions” and “Ask questions, make text-to-self connections and text-to-text connections.”

Learning

The Learning code was referenced 26 times and involved student references to the information that was being gained from the reading. This included efferent responses related to learning facts, studying topics, finding hidden objects (as seen in *I Spy* books) or counting materials. Two sample student comments were “They study things. Like space,” and “They find things in some books. Like 10 robins.”

Viewing

Viewing was the fourth most referenced category for characteristics of good readers. Student references to viewing images or illustrations were mentioned 24 times. Many emerging decoders are primarily reading picture books and use pictures to help support their access to written text. Examples of student comments categorized as Viewing included the following: “They try to read with pictures if they don’t know the words” and “Look at the pictures ‘cause maybe that’s where the story is.”

Speed/Rate

The codes of Speed/Rate and Quantity were tied for fifth and sixth most frequently referenced characteristics with 17 student references each. Student responses were categorized as Speed/Rate if the students made reference to the speed or rate of reading. This did not include reference to accuracy, only the rate of reading. Most student comments in this category were nearly identical. Two examples include the following: “Reads really fast” and “They read really fast.”

Quantity

Students referenced the quantity of reading 17 times. For a student response to be coded as Quantity, there had to be reference to the amount of reading and/or the length of the texts (quantity of pages) that were being read. Younger students often referenced chapter books- this could be due to the fact that first graders are rarely encouraged or allowed to read chapter books because of the length and readability levels. Sample student responses for this category included “They read long chapter books” and “They read really good and a lot.”

Writing

Writing and Social Contexts had the same number of references, 14, and were tied for the seventh and eighth most frequently mentioned characteristics. The category of Writing included reference to writing in response to reading, drawing pictures and creating text, and general writing. Sample student responses were “They write” and “They draw pictures and make books.” Students in the two inquiry-based classrooms made all of the writing references. There were no references to writing in the scripted curriculum classroom.

Social Contexts

Student responses were categorized as Social Contexts if they made reference to the social aspects of reading. This included references to reading with others such as peers, parents, siblings, and teachers. One student commented, “Sometimes read quiet sometimes loud. They can read by themselves and with other people.” Another student responded, “They read by themselves and with their friends and moms and dads and brothers and sisters. At home and at school.” Similar to the Writing code, students in the inquiry-based classrooms made all of the Social Contexts references. There were no references in this category made by students in the scripted classroom.

Effort

Effort was the least frequently referenced characteristic of good readers and was mentioned only 11 times. Students’ responses were coded with Effort if they discussed the amount of work, effort or practice needed to be a good reader. Some example comments were, “Practicing hard. Like working to sound out the letters.” The previous comment was coded as both Effort and Decoding because of the reference to practicing and working as well as sounding out the letters. Another example was, “They gotta work hard and be good.”

Curricular, Linguistic and Socioeconomic Differences

The researcher utilized qualitative methods to analyze and categorize student responses to gain a deeper understanding of diverse students’ perspectives in varied curricular settings. These variables are particularly important because many studies attribute students’ performance and perceptions to first language or socioeconomic status, but fail to consider curricular considerations. Likewise, many studies consider curricular or instructional approaches, but do not take into consideration the additional factors such as first language and SES. The descriptive statistics of this analysis are represented in percentages according to variables in Table 2. The breakdown provides percentages of each axial code (theme) by broad category of curricular approach, linguistic background, and socioeconomic status. As might be expected in primary-aged classrooms, responses related to decoding were prevalent. However, they were most prevalent in the scripted curriculum classroom with 100% of the interviewed students mentioning decoding as a characteristic of good readers. Monolingual English speakers with and without free and reduced lunch as well as ELLs with and without free and reduced lunch mentioned writing during the interviews in both inquiry-based classrooms. However, Writing and Social Context did not have a single reference in the scripted curriculum classroom.

When comparing only linguistic variables of ELLs and monolingual English speakers, the discrepancy was never higher than 20 percentage points. The characteristic that had the largest difference in percentage was Viewing with 67% of ELLs compared to only 48% of monolingual English

speakers (difference of 19 percentage points). When comparing only socioeconomic status as measured by free and reduced lunch, only one characteristic possessed a discrepancy of more than 20 percentage points. The Speed/Rate category had a difference of 31 percentage points between students receiving free and reduced lunch (54%) and students not receiving free and reduced lunch (23%).

The final overall comparison included analyzing the differences between the inquiry-based and scripted classrooms. All but three of the categories (Quantity, Strategies, and Effort) had larger than 20 percentage point differences. The largest discrepancy of 76 percentage points was seen in the Speed/Rate category with only 7% of students in inquiry-based classrooms identifying this as a characteristic compared to 83% of students in a scripted classroom. The following ranked list includes the percentage point differences between inquiry-based and scripted classrooms:

1. Writing (Inquiry +54)
2. Social Contexts (Inquiry +54)
3. Decoding (Scripted +46)
4. Viewing (Inquiry +36)
5. Learning (Inquiry +34)

While the general percentages provided an overall view of student responses, they needed to be analyzed at a more detailed level because the private-inquiry based class had zero students who spoke a language other than English or received free and reduced lunch. To gain a more in-depth understanding, Table 3 provides results reported by axial code (theme) with percentages of first language and socioeconomic status (monolingual without free and reduced lunch; monolingual with free and reduced lunch; ELL without free and reduced lunch; ELL with free and reduced lunch) broken down by site (inquiry-based private, inquiry-based public, scripted public). This table provides a more detailed look at the percentages of students according to linguistic and socioeconomic differences that were present in each classroom.

Examining the Largest Discrepancies

The most common responses were related to Decoding and Speed/Rate. However, when separated by curricular approaches, students' in the inquiry-based settings most common responses included references to Viewing, Learning, Strategies and the Social Contexts of reading. As reported earlier in the findings, the largest discrepancies were found between curricular approaches: Writing and Social Contexts (Inquiry +54); Decoding (Scripted +46); Viewing (Inquiry +36); and Learning (Inquiry +34). The findings suggest that student perceptions were influenced more by curricular approach than first language or free and reduced lunch status. The following graphs of the three most significant differences provide a visual representation of the aggregated analysis. These are organized by good reader characteristics with percentages of first language and socioeconomic status (monolingual without free and reduced lunch; monolingual with free and reduced lunch; ELL without free and reduced lunch; ELL with free and reduced lunch) broken down by classroom site (inquiry-based private, inquiry-based public, scripted public). See Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Limitations

My research had several limitations. This study was limited by its small sample size that was selected with purposeful sampling. Random sampling was not used, and this combined with the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings from this study. Additionally, only one grade level, first grade, was used for this study. Because of this, the qualitative findings and descriptive statistics provide localized findings with the possibility for larger-scale, future research. Future research that

could address these limitations might include a larger sample size including random sampling from multiple sites and kindergarten through sixth grades. Including a larger sample size could increase the opportunity for generalizing the results and allow for multiple versions of these curricular approaches to be studied (multiple teachers utilizing the same instructional/curricular approach). This would allow for the additional consideration of developmental stages and students' ages in addition to linguistic, socioeconomic and curricular factors.

Discussion

Students' reflections about "what good readers do" are representative of their definition of reading and what they believe they should be striving toward as a reader. In classrooms where teachers (or the script) emphasize rapid decoding, word recognition, and literal recall, students develop a view of reading that is not focused on meaning making. This also limits their opportunities for authentic reading experiences. Students' beliefs about reading influence their motivation and engagement with text. When students understand that reading is a transaction with text in order to construct meaning in a social context, their reasons for engaging with texts shift from pleasing the teacher and getting good grades to learning and sharing information with peers.

Too often the performance of young bilinguals on academic assessments and attitudes toward reading is credited to their socioeconomic status, first language or individual teacher effectiveness. While these are important factors to consider, we must also take into consideration the curricular approaches that teachers are using with these students. In this study, the researcher found this to be the greatest influence on students' perceptions, greater than both socioeconomic status and first language. Some teachers have little to no say in the school or district curriculum, yet it dominates how they provide instruction to their students. In many primary classrooms, the bulk of assessment in the primary grades is focused on letter identification and decoding. When prevalently used assessments like Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) emphasize words correct per minute, this influences teacher instruction. When these are the skills that are being assessed and reported, this also sends a message to students that reading as many words per minute as possible is the most valued aspect of reading.

Decoding and word identification play an important role in early literacy, but as Allington (2013) noted, "Instruction in letter-sound relationship is of little value or utility unless the child is interested in using those letter-sound relationships to read or write" (p. 522). An alternative to relying on phonics and worksheet-heavy instruction found in many scripted curriculum for young children would include more informal assessments and student-centered instruction. Running records and analyzing invented writing for inquiry-based purposes can serve as assessments and guides for future instruction based on students' needs. Student-centered instruction with authentic purposes for reading and writing influenced students' perceptions about literacy more than first language or socioeconomic status in the three classrooms in this study.

Students' perceptions about literacy have the possibility to translate into their goals and patterned ways of interacting with texts. If the goal is reading fast, we are failing to support an in-depth understanding about literate practices. Likewise, if the goal is constructing meaning and transacting with texts in social contexts, we are providing invitations to participate in meaningful literacy practices in the primary grades. There is no doubt that decoding and fluent reading plays an important role in emergent readers' development. However, "good readers" do more than read fast. They have an understanding of the relationship between reading and writing. They understand that literacy is used in social contexts for gaining and sharing information and stories. They understand that "good readers" possess many

characteristics because reading is complex. These characteristics need to be present in early literacy curriculum because they are doing more than “learning to read.”

This study explored and explained how the nine re-occurring themes found in student responses are impacted by curricular, linguistic and socio-economic factors. While all factors are important to consider when providing early literacy instruction, curricular approaches in these settings appeared to have the largest influence on student perceptions. Language and literacy development of young children, particularly young ELLs, is an urgent issue in the field of literacy education, and findings related to variables influencing how students perceive literacy can be of great benefit to the research community. The implications from this study provide suggestions for future research that would include larger sample sizes, random sampling, and a kindergarten through sixth grade span. The implications for instruction include emphasizing learning and meaning-construction with texts in authentic contexts for young bilinguals and monolinguals. Teachers can greatly influence students’ perceptions of “good readers” with their curricular choices and emphasis on meaningful reading instruction and assessment.

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